Hidden Treasures: Tips and Rewards for Researching in Manuscript Collections

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What is a manuscript collection?

Manuscript: a piece of writing in its native, unpublished state. Derived from the Latin meaning written by hand, the term is also applied in modern times to unpublished typescripts (q. v.)

Sources: Individuals, estates, businesses, groups and organizations, purchase

Items That May Be in Manuscript Collections:

- Document originals (deeds, tax receipts, probate, etc.)
- Personal records (account books, diaries, letters)
- Military service information
- Business Records (employment records, account books, bank accounts)
- Organizational Records (membership lists, minute books, yearbooks)
- Photographs
- Oral histories
- Digital collections
- Maps
- Artwork
- Memoirs
- Scrapbooks
- Architectural Records

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**Types of Information in Manuscript Collections**

- Public records not retained by local governments
- Insight into your ancestor
- Events in your ancestor’s life
- Additional sources providing indirect evidence
- Vital records in areas where they were not recorded
- A sense of how your ancestor participated in historic events
- Photographs
- Bridge for information gaps in burned counties
- Historical background for places where your ancestors lived
- Newspapers found in no other collections nor in digital format

**Organization of Collections**

1. Finding aids - The materials in a manuscript repository may appear in an overview—such as a collection inventory. These finding aids contain a title, date range, brief description, access and use restrictions, brief history or biography, description of how contents are arranged, related materials in the same or other archives, and contents listing by box/folder. The latter can be very detailed and have an every name list. Typical finding aids guide researchers to a particular folder or box in a collection.

2. Online access – A small percentage of manuscripts have been digitized or transcribed and may be available online.

**Where do I find manuscript collections?**

- a. Relatives and your own family documents
- b. Types of organizations that maintain collections
  1. Historical Societies: National, State, County, Local
  2. Organizational Offices (churches, fraternal organizations)
  3. Libraries
- c. Web search
- d. Online access
- e. Research guides (examples:
  - FamilySearch and National Genealogical Society (NGS)
  - “Research in the States” series)
- 4. Universities
- 5. Archives
Suggested Strategy for Finding an Ancestor in Manuscript Collections

1. Reasonably Exhaustive Research paying particular attention to locations, occupation(s) of your ancestor, and their FAN (friends, associates, and neighbors).

2. Manuscripts may be in national, state, local, and specialty repositories. Many of the most useful ones can be searched via:
   - *Archive Grid* - [https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/](https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/)
   - *WorldCat* - [https://www.worldcat.org/advancedsearch](https://www.worldcat.org/advancedsearch) - use advanced search—under “Format,” select “Archival material” Try different searches—“Jones Family,” “John Jones,” Jones and <location>. Be sure to enclose the given name and surname of the ancestor in “ “. For example—“John Smith”.
   - *Digital Public Library of America* – [https://dp.la/](https://dp.la/)
   - *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC)* – [https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/](https://www.loc.gov/coll/nucmc/)

3. Repeat this for some of the principal associates of the ancestor identified in your other research. (Especially if these were prominent individuals.)

4. If there is a promising collection(s)—determine if there is a finding aid and view it. Larger archives may have their own search capability.

5. Examine the manuscripts or contact the archive to determine how to access the collection (online, digital, microfilm, photocopies, on-site visit)

6. If the repository will not copy or loan material—find a local researcher to do the work. The Association of Professional Genealogists [https://www.apgen.org/directory/search.html?type=location&new_search=true](https://www.apgen.org/directory/search.html?type=location&new_search=true) or local societies/archives may identify local researchers.

7. Many smaller archives are not available on any archival portal.
   a) Use a search engine—providing the location and “archive”. For example—“Lincoln County North Carolina” and archive. Try both the full and abbreviated state in the search (e. g., N. Car., NC)
   b) Try combinations of location with the person’s name and surname—“historical society,” “genealogical society,” “papers,” or “collection”.
   c) Use the search engine with the location name plus “history” to access local histories or other collections
   d) Contact local societies directly by email or phone
   e) Call the main local library branch if you cannot find a genealogical or historical society. Libraries often know of local repositories.
**Consider Donating Documents to Manuscript Collections!**

- Preserve the documents and access—especially if—“My kids will probably just throw this away” or “None of my relatives are interested”
- What should you donate?
- Where should you donate? (Considerations: accessibility, geography, stability, professionalism, your wishes)
- Donation Process (contact, ask questions, deposition of unwanted items, deed of gift, publicity)
- Details can be found at: [https://www2.archivists.org/publications/brochures/donating-familyrecs](https://www2.archivists.org/publications/brochures/donating-familyrecs)

**Selected Bibliography**


